

The Message of

St Thérèse

of Lisieux



by Mgr Vernon Johnson



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*The quotations in this pamphlet are taken from the Saint's
Autobiography, unless otherwise stated.*

THE MESSAGE OF ST THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

Has St Thérèse a particular message to the world? If so, what is it? To many Catholics this question has never arisen. To them St Thérèse is a Saint canonised by the Catholic Church and, as such, is proposed in some sense as a model for the faithful; but as to what that model exactly is they are by no means clear. Some again hold her in great devotion as the Saint from whom they have received great personal help and many favours which they describe as ‘roses’. To others again this very devotion is distasteful; they dislike this talk of roses, it savours of the sentimental and picturesque, and they dislike sentiment, especially where religion is concerned: they prefer their own saints: St Thérèse is not for them, and they leave it at that.

A still greater number of people find a stumbling block in the word ‘little’. They think it means something weak and feeble, whereas on the lips of St Thérèse the word ‘little’ expresses that complete dependence upon God which is the foundation of all spiritual greatness. The whole secret of the Little Way lies in the words of our Blessed Lord, ‘Without me you can do nothing’.

These, one and all, miss the whole reason why God has raised up this particular Saint in our own particular time. What then is the message of St Thérèse? It is true

that she said she would scatter roses on the earth, but she did not say that that was her Mission. What then is her Mission? Her Mission is to teach to the faithful her 'Little Way of Spiritual Childhood'.

THE LITTLE WAY OF SPIRITUAL CHILDHOOD

The Witness of the Saint

Towards the end of her last illness she said to her sister, Mother Agnes of Jesus: ‘I feel that my Mission is soon to begin, my Mission to teach souls my little way’. Her sister asked her: ‘What is the little way that you would teach to souls?’ ‘It is The Way of Spiritual Childhood, the way of trust and absolute self-surrender’. Was this sense of a Mission to teach her Little Way to souls a mere delusion, just an expression of pride? Or was it the prophecy of a divine Mission? Pope Benedict XV gives the answer: ‘Since Sister Thérèse had been humble all her life, it could only have been by a divine inspiration that she spoke in her last moments in an apparently contrary sense’.

The Witness of Almighty God

When St Thérèse spoke these words concerning her Mission to teach her Little Way to souls she was hidden in her convent, utterly unknown to the world outside, not appreciated even by some of the sisters among whom she lived. No sooner had she died than her tomb became the scene of countless miracles. After the publication of her

autobiography further miracles took place in every corner of the world in answer to the prayers of the faithful. Europe, America, Africa, India, and China, all gave their testimony to these miraculous happenings. In the words of Pius XI, St Thérèse became ‘a prodigy of miracles’. God, by these miracles, is calling the attention of the faithful to the sanctity of St Thérèse, and to her particular type of sanctity, holding it up for the imitation of the faithful. So these endless miracles are simply Almighty God pointing the faithful to the Saint and saying: ‘Look well, for this person comes from Me to teach you “the little way to spiritual childhood, the way of trust and absolute self-surrender”.’

The Witness of the Church

So overwhelming was this avalanche of miracles and this world-wide devotion to the Saint that it resulted in an event till then most rare in the history of the Church. The period of fifty years which must elapse between the death and canonisation of a Saint was dispensed by the Holy See, and within twenty-eight years St Thérèse was a canonised Saint of the Catholic Church. In the process of canonisation two Sovereign Pontiffs have laboured to draw the attention of the faithful to the special message and Mission of the Saint. Benedict XV says: ‘There is a call to the faithful of every nation, no matter what may be their age, sex, or state of life, to enter whole-heartedly into

the Little Way which led Sister Thérèse to the summit of heroic virtue'. 'In spiritual childhood is the secret of sanctity for *all* the faithful of the Catholic world'. 'It is Our special desire that the secret of the sanctity of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus may be revealed to all Our children'. Pius XI is no less definite: 'We earnestly desire that *all the faithful* should study her in order to copy her, becoming children themselves; since otherwise they cannot, according to the word of the Master, arrive at the kingdom of heaven'. 'Let us listen to what little Thérèse will tell us, she who has become a word of God'. These words of Benedict XV and Pius XI clearly present St Thérèse to the Universal Church as the authorised teacher of her Little Way of Spiritual Childhood.

The Scriptural Foundation

It is embedded in the Sacred Scriptures. 'As your word unfolds, it gives light, and the *little ones* understand' (*Ps* 119:130). 'The decree of the Lord is trustworthy, wisdom for the *little ones*' (*Ps* 19:7). 'The Lord is the keeper of *little ones*' (*Ps* 114:6). 'Whosoever is a *little one*, let him come to me' (*Pr* 9:4). Listen to the prophet, 'The wolf lives with the lamb, the panther lies down with the kid, calf and lion cub feed together, with a *little one* to lead them' (*Is* 11:6). A perfect parable of the spirit of childhood taking the conflicting passions of human nature and binding them into one harmonious whole. 'Like a son

comforted by his mother will I comfort you' (Is 66:13). So far the Old Testament. The New Testament is even more insistent, and the speaker is Our Lord Himself, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to the *little ones*' (Mt 11:25). 'Let the *little children* alone, and do not stop them coming to me; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs' (Mt 19:14). And supremely – 'Unless you change and become like *little children*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 18:3). In view of these words Benedict XV says that Our Lord declared the way of spiritual childhood to be 'absolutely essential'.

THE NATURE OF THE LITTLE WAY

It was from these texts that St Thérèse drew the inspiration of her Little Way. She would be her heavenly Father's little child, and would act towards Him in her spiritual life exactly as a little child acts towards its parent in the natural life.

Let us now examine the foundations of this Little Way of Spiritual Childhood.

Love

In ordinary human life, what is the supreme relationship between a little child and its mother? It is love. It is the mother's love that has brought the little child into being, and by its mother's love it is supported every moment. Above all, the thing which the mother wants supremely from her little child is its love. If she possesses all else but does not possess that, her heart is left aching. Now, from the point of view of the little one, what does the little child want? It wants love. Without its mother's love it is not merely restless, it is completely lost. Again, in its helplessness the only gift that the little child can give to its mother is its love. Our Lord did not say 'Unless you be converted and become children'; He said 'little children'. In its littleness it can give only one thing, but that one

thing is everything, namely, love. Between a mother and her child all is love, and if this should not exist, then all society cries out in horror that things are wrong.

Now in the supernatural life this is precisely theologically true. God is our heavenly Father. He has created us because He loves us. By His love we are supported every moment. The one thing which this heavenly Father wants from us, His children, is our love. Without it, His heart is left aching. We, on our side, we, His little children, we want supremely the love of our heavenly Father. Without it we are restless and dissatisfied. Why is the world so unhappy? Because it is trying to satisfy itself with something less than the love of God. We are made for that love of God, and we are restless till we rest within it. And, in return for this love, what can we give that will satisfy the heart of our heavenly Father? Only love. In our helplessness we are only able to give our love, and that is the one thing God wants. All our actions are only valuable in His eyes insofar as they are the expression of our love for Him. That is the foundation of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood, it is all love. It begins in love, exists by love, and ends in love.

In the eyes of St Thérèse this was everything: ‘My Little Way is all love’. Sometimes it is the love of her heavenly Father which absorbs her. Her continual cry was ‘God thirsts for our love’. At the other times it is the love of her own heart; her love goes out in response to her

Father's love. 'Let us love', she writes, 'for love alone our hearts are made'. Sometimes it is the two together which captivate her soul. 'Oh, my God, I know it. Love is repaid by love alone. Therefore I have sought, I have found how to ease my heart by giving You love for love'.

In the natural sphere, where does a little child get its power to love? It is not a purely subjective emotion. The child depends for it entirely upon its mother. The capacity to love which exists in its little heart it owes to its mother's love; and this capacity is only quickened into action by the objective fact of its mother's love outside it. As it looks at its mother it cares nothing if she be rich, intelligent or beautiful. All it looks for is her love and, seeing its mother's love, its own little love is quickened into life. It is the same in the supernatural life. Our power to love God does not spring from a subjective emotion. It all depends on the objective fact of God's love for us, that love which has existed from all eternity, long before we were born. We depend upon Him for our existence, but, far more important still, we owe entirely to Him the capacity which we possess to love Him in the only way which can satisfy His heart. 'We are to love, then, because he loved us first' (*1 Jn* 4:19). That is the order. The little – that is to say, childlike – soul, who treads the Little Way, looking at its heavenly Father, puts aside all His other attributes, His omniscience, His omnipotence, and sees just one overwhelming thing, His love.

It was this that captivated the soul of St Thérèse. As she looked, with the eyes of a child, on the mysteries of the Faith – Bethlehem, Calvary, the Resurrection – they all spelt this one word, love. It was the heavenly Father’s love coming down to earth to fill the soul of His little child with love and so lift it up to Him. To her the heavenly Father’s love shone out in the Sacred Scriptures supremely in the words of our Blessed Lord: ‘If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him, and make our home with him’ (*Jn* 14:23). Here was the supreme gift of the heavenly Father’s love, nothing less than the Holy Trinity dwelling in her soul; for where the Father and the Son come, there comes also the Holy Spirit. Her soul was the tabernacle of the Trinity. ‘Oh, Trinity’, she cried, ‘You are the prisoner of my love’. The very love of the Trinity in her soul, lifting her up into the very life of God. Here was the source of all her power to give the Father a love worthy of Him. Meditating on this, she says: ‘Oh, my Saviour, it is You whom I love, it is You who draws me so irresistibly to You, You who, descending into this land of exile, was willing to suffer and to die in order to lift up each single soul and plunge it into the very heart of the Trinity, love’s eternal home’.

This precious truth was focussed to a point for her in the Blessed Sacrament, where the heavenly Father’s love is made tangible and concrete for every one of His children.

Because of this the Blessed Sacrament was to her the very centre of her life. In it she found revealed all the secrets of that Father's love. 'Oh, my Saviour, You ascended into light inaccessible, yet You remain in the vale of tears under the appearance of a small white host in order to nourish our souls with Your own substance. Let me tell You that Your love runs even unto folly. Before such folly, how could You but desire that my soul should leap up to You'.

This, then, is the first foundation of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood. To those who walk this Little Way all is love between the heavenly Father and His child; and it is precisely the little, childlike soul that, putting aside all other truths that might complicate its vision, goes straight to the heart of things and sees just the overwhelming truth of the Father's love. To the little soul the whole burden of Scripture is the coming down of the Father's love to dwell in the soul of His little child, and so lift it up to Him; and the whole of the Catholic Church, its Hierarchy and its Sacraments, exist for one purpose and one end, namely, the planting of that seed of divine love in each individual soul. And therefore it is the Blessed Sacrament which is, above all, the centre and the inspiration of the Little Way, because in it this truth is focussed to a point with such complete simplicity. And it is the little soul which, with its complete simplicity of outlook, sees this most directly; just as, in the case of a little child, the only thing it sees in its parent is love.

Humility

What is the next fact that stands out most clearly in the life of a little child? It is its dependence upon its mother, a dependence absolute and complete. If it lets go its mother's hand for a moment there is a disaster and the little one falls. Without the mother it can do absolutely nothing. Its sense of dependence is precisely in proportion to its littleness. Its only safety is to keep a firm hold of its mother's hand. If only it does this, its mother can lead it through perils, by which, if left to itself, it would be overwhelmed, and to heights which, by itself, it could never climb.

In the supernatural sphere this is theologically accurate. We are completely dependent upon our heavenly Father for everything, dependent upon Him for our physical existence and, what is far more, completely dependent upon Him for that life of union with Him for which He had made us. The dwelling of the Holy Trinity in our souls is His free gift. By ourselves we can do nothing. If we let go of divine grace we fall and there is disaster. 'Without me you can do nothing' (*Jn 15:5*). But if we keep our hand firmly in our heavenly Father's hand – that is to say, if we rely entirely on grace and surrender our wills completely to it – then the heavenly Father will lead us through perils which otherwise might overwhelm us and to heights of sanctity which, by ourselves, we could never climb. It is those who tread the Little Way of

Spiritual Childhood who see this most clearly, just because they are little souls. In the natural life it is the littleness of the little child that gives it its sense of dependence upon its mother, and it is the littleness of the little soul which enables it to realise its dependence upon the heavenly Father.

And what is littleness in a soul? It is humility. Humility is the virtue which enables us to see how utterly dependent we are upon the heavenly Father. And so St Thérèse loved humility above all else. It was the essential foundation of her Little Way. That is why the Little Way is so sure, so safe. Pride and humility in deadly conflict, that is the whole process of redemption. To be emptied of self so as to be filled with the divine love needs a new birth, a conversion. 'Unless you be converted and become as little children you cannot enter the kingdom of Heaven.' As pride is the root of all sin, making us think we can live independently of God and so separating us from Him, teaching us, in fact, to let go of the heavenly Father's hand, so humility is the foundation of all holiness, teaching us our essential dependence upon God, placing our hand once again firmly in that of the heavenly Father.

To realise her nothingness apart from God was St Thérèse's greatest joy. 'The Almighty has done great things for me, and the greatest is to show me my littleness and my helplessness for any good'. Nothing taught her her dependence so much as the knowledge of her own

failings. 'I do not grieve in seeing that I am weakness itself. On the contrary, it is in this I glory; and I expect each day to discover new imperfections; and I acknowledge that these lights concerning my nothingness do me more good than the lights concerning the Faith.' And so St Thérèse learnt to be glad at the knowledge of her failings just because that taught her her littleness, which was so precious in her eyes because it was so precious to our Lord. 'That which pleases Jesus in my little soul is to see me love my littleness' – the littleness which enabled her to keep firm hold of her Father's hand.

This humility is no weak or negative thing. It is the most powerful thing in the world, for it is the key which unlocks the soul to grace. By ourselves we can do nothing to increase in us the supernatural love for which we were made, but by grace we help by removing that which is in the way of the divine love, namely, self-love. With every act of humility, every time we accept a humiliation lovingly, more of self is removed, and therefore there is more room for the divine love to dwell in the soul. The depth of the ocean depends upon the depth of the caverns that lie below, and the depth of supernatural love in a soul is exactly in proportion to the caverns that humility has wrought in the secret recesses of that soul. And so the Sacrament of Penance takes its place quite simply in the Little Way as the heavenly Father's plan for emptying the soul of self-love, enabling the little one to take firm hold

of His hand again. The soul that is really humble and empty of self-love, surrendered to the love of God, is the soul of which Jesus can take full possession and carry through difficulties and up to heights which otherwise the soul would find impossible. That is why humility is the most powerful thing in the world.

That is what St Thérèse meant when she said: 'It is my weakness that makes all my strength. Jesus did everything in me. I did nothing but remain little and weak'. Thus the very thing that to many people seems to be weak and trifling, namely, the 'littleness' of the Little Way, is in reality its true strength, its very foundation. For the soul that is most humble is most filled with divine love, and that is the only true strength, the only real greatness. Our Lady was 'full of grace' because she was so perfectly humble, so empty of self. And because St Thérèse was so humble, so weak, therefore she is now so great a Saint in Heaven. Our heavenly Father points to her today, saying to us: 'Whosoever, therefore, shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the Kingdom of Heaven'.

Confidence

From humility springs the next foundation of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood. In the natural sphere, what is it that springs from the dependence of the little child? Out of its utter dependence springs an unquestioning confidence. Its very littleness gives it an intuitive sense of

confidence. It never occurs to the little child that its mother could fail it. The result is that it plays in perfect confidence at its mother's feet. On the mother's side the utter dependence of the little child cries to her heart as nothing else could do. One glance, one cry, and, if she is a perfect mother, even before that cry is heard she is there with her arms around her little one. That is the picture. And the smaller the little child, the more watchful is the mother to anticipate its every need.

It is exactly the same with the souls who tread the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood. Out of their complete dependence upon the heavenly Father there springs a complete confidence in His love. The humble soul knows that it has been made solely to love this heavenly Father, that by itself it is powerless to do so, and that therefore the heavenly Father has given the Holy Trinity to dwell in the soul; and that He has given the Blessed Sacrament to feed the soul, just in order that the soul may grow in its love for Him. How then can that heavenly Father fail His child, provided that that little child keeps humble and little? 'Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you' (*Is* 49:15). All the heavenly Father needs is a look, a cry, a prayer, and He is there with His arms round us. He will do all in us and for us if only we remain little and humble.

Our Blessed Lord has committed Himself. He who said, 'Unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of Heaven' is bound to come to the aid of all those who, for His sake, are trying to become humble and dependent souls.

The mysteries of our Holy Faith, which are the proofs to the little, humble soul of the heavenly Father's love, are also to the humble soul the grounds of its confidence. Bethlehem, Calvary, the Resurrection, the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in the soul, the Blessed Sacrament, all spell one word, Confidence. 'Since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up to benefit us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that he will not refuse anything he can give' (*Rm* 8:32). It was this that gave St Thérèse her invincible confidence. 'My Way is all love and confidence in God. I cannot understand those souls who are afraid of so tender a friend', 'What offends Jesus, what wounds Him to the heart, is our want of confidence.' 'We cannot have too much confidence in the good God, so mighty, so merciful'. What is it that destroys confidence in so many souls? It is an unchildlike fear of the heavenly Father's justice. With St Thérèse it was never so. In the Little Way there is indeed the true filial fear, but never the fear of God's justice which would rob the little soul of its confidence.

To St Thérèse the heavenly Father's love is supremely a merciful love. Just because she was so conscious of her

littleness and weakness that she saw, with a clearness impossible to a soul less conscious of its weakness, that the supreme quality of the heavenly Father's love was its mercy. Her soul's delight was to meditate on the merciful love of God Incarnate stooping down to earth and reaching out to that which is weakest, most soiled, most miserable. That, to her, was the supreme motive of the merciful love of God, namely, pity for that which is weak. She knew her weakness would cry to the heavenly Father's mercy as nothing else could do. From this sprang her invincible confidence. She says: 'Indeed, I hope as much from the justice of God as from His mercy. It is because He is just that He is compassionate and merciful, long-suffering, plenteous in mercy. "For he knows our frame, he remembers that we are but dust." 'As the Father has compassion for his children, so has the Lord compassion for us'. 'What joy to think that our Lord is just, that He takes into account all our weaknesses and He knows perfectly all the frailty of our nature. How, then, can I be afraid?'

It is this clear vision of the merciful love of God which makes the Little Way so all-embracing. On the one hand it gives help and confidence to the greatest sinners just because they are such great sinners. 'It is not merely because I have been preserved from mortal sin that I lift up my heart to God in confidence and love. I am certain that, even if I had on my conscience every imaginable sin, I should lose nothing of my confidence, but would

throw myself, heart-broken with sorrow, into the arms of my Saviour. I remember His love for the Prodigal Son; I have heard His words to Mary Magdalene, to the woman taken in adultery, and to the woman of Samaria. No, there is no one who could frighten me, for I know too well what to believe concerning His mercy and His love.'

But if, on the one hand, the Little Way gives confidence to great sinners, it also gives confidence to those who are tortured by scruples because of their little failings. In the natural sphere little children do not fall very far, and, if they do fall, they do not hurt themselves very much, and the mother's arms are round them almost before they fall. St Thérèse tells us it is the same in the spiritual sphere. The soul that is humble cannot fall very gravely. The heavenly Father is there, watching over it, ready to put His arms round it after every fall. 'I have long believed that the Lord is more tender than a mother. I have sounded the depth of more than one mother's heart and I know that a mother is ever willing to forgive the involuntary little failings of her child.' In fact, these little failings and miseries can be turned into a blessing, for they teach the little soul its weakness and so throw it back once more into its Father's arms. 'What does it matter to me to fall each moment? By that I feel my weakness and therein I find great profit. My God, you see what I can do if You do not carry me in your arms.'

Thus the Little Way is a way of complete trust and self-surrender to the merciful love of the Father. For the little soul knows that, whether its sins have been great or not, the heavenly Father who has created it solely to love Him cannot fail to give it all that it needs so long as it remains humble and penitent. This takes away all the Jansenist servile fear of God and, instead of walking in that fear, the little soul walks hand in hand with its heavenly Father with the radiant confidence of a little child. So walking, it is delivered from another fear also – the fear of the future. For one of the most precious fruits of this confidence is shown in the power to cease to worry about the future. It is right indeed to take every prudent precaution, but our Lord definitely says: ‘Do not worry about tomorrow’. Anxiety about the future is one of the most fruitful sources of destruction of confidence in a soul. How many people are worn to shreds by fears of a future trouble which never comes, or of one which, if it does come, seldom comes in the way we fear it will.

The little child does not think beyond the day. It receives all it needs from its parents from moment to moment. This is exactly true of the life of the little soul. It lives from day to day. Every Christian knows the philosophy of living just for today; how, if we live for today, it lessens the power of our temptations, because we are tempted only for today; how it takes away the power of pain if we have to suffer only for today.

But St Thérèse, with her Little Way, throws completely new light on it. For she says that all this is secondary, that the real thing is to think of today as the only day we have in which to love God. What quality then will we put into our love!

My life is an instant, an hour which passes by,
My life is a moment which flies and is away,
You know, O my God, that to love You on this earth,
I only have today.

If we love Him today as though we had no other day in which to love Him, then of course, automatically, all our pain becomes easier to bear, all our temptations lose their strength. But it is the love which is the key to it all.

‘I notice’, she says, ‘that our Lord does not give me provisions, but nourishes me from moment to moment with food that is ever new. I do not know how it happens, but I just believe that it is Jesus, hidden in the depth of my soul, inspiring me and giving me the power, moment by moment, to do what He wishes.’ Once again we see the theology of the Little Way. For here is the doctrine of grace. We are not given grace for a tomorrow which may never come, but we are given grace which is never lacking, however feeble may be our response.

In her suffering at the end of her life she reveals that it was this which gave her so much strength. ‘If I did not

simply live from one moment to another it would be impossible for me to be patient, but I look only at the present. I forget the past and I take good care not to forestall the future. When we yield to discouragement or despair, it is usually because we think too much about the past or the future.’ So she trod her Little Way with childlike confidence right to the end.

Love towards The Father

We have seen that the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood is all based on the heavenly Father’s love. The little soul, created purely for the Father’s love, moves among the path of spiritual childhood in complete dependence upon His goodness and His power. Now what response can the little soul make to that love? How can it co-operate with the heavenly Father’s plan of love? In the natural sphere, what is the activity of the little child? Watch any little one with it’s mother. How does it shows its love? By little things – just anything that comes across its path in its little world, a flower, a picture, or a toy – it takes it straight to its mother for her to see; something so small that it has no value except insofar as it expresses the love of the little one, which is so precious in its mother’s eyes.

A little child relates everything to its mother in little acts of love. And, all the time, it can only do it because it’s mother is there, watching it, supporting it with her care and ready to receive its offering. Without her its love

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